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AUTHOR Friedley, Sheryl A.
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ABSTRACT

Assuming that the forensic coach should attempt to facilitate the students' success in original speech events as well as provide a basis for understanding communication skills to be transferred to other communication settings, the coach as "educator" is crucial. While the purpose of the coach is to guide and direct a student toward an appropriate topic--not dictate the topic--the coach should strongly encourage topic choice based on the nature of the event, competitor, situation, and audience. The student, however, should conduct the major portion of the research as an independent effort. Encouraging the student to explore a variety of resource materials and allowing the student an opportunity to exert considerable effort in the development of this project will invariably lead to a better understanding of the topic and greater satisfaction with the end result. While there are many coaches who encourage an extemporaneous style of delivery, such skills can be developed through other events, and there are valuable skills taught by the specialized care required in a memorized manuscript speech. Once the student has memorized the original speech, the coach should begin training the student to use his or her voice and body effectively in the delivery of the speech. Finally, a coach's input into critical evaluation can be invaluable. Analyzing formal evaluations outside the competition will enhance the value of the educational competitive setting. (HTH)

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The Role of Forensic Coaches in Preparing Students for Original Speech Events

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Sheryl A. Friedley

George Mason University

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The Role of Forensic Coaches in Preparing Students
for Original Speech Events

As I began to consider the role of "forensic coach" for the purpose of developing this paper, several synonyms came to mind--parent, counselor, secretary, banker, transportation director, fashion coordinator, negotiator, and artistic consultant for visual aids. Since none of these synonyms seemed professionally appropriate, I then turned to Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (1972) for further clarification and was surprised to learn that the term "coach" means " to train intensively by instruction, demonstration, and practice." Still not completely convinced that Webster's definition of "coach" accurately describes my complex role, I decided to generate my personal definition of "forensic coach"--one that would exemplify my "ideal" original speech events coach if there were twenty-five hours in each day and only two students to coach.

While original speech events, by definition, are the product of the student competitor, there has long been controvery surrounding the nature of coaching in these events. Although I firmly believe that the original speech should be the product of the student competitor, I am also firmly committed to an educational philosophy which advocates an active advisory role at each developmental stage by the coach of these events. Assuming that the coach should attempt to facilitate the student's success in the forensic setting as well as provide a basis for understanding communication skills to be transferred to other communication settings, the coach as "educator" is crucial. Specifically, I will explore the role of the

forensic coach in preparing students for original speech events in six areas: 1) topic selection, 2) topic development, 3) research, 4) manuscript development, 5) delivery, and 6) critical evaluation.

Topic Selection

Coaching in the area of topic selection should begin with a basic discussion of the forensic activity as well as the specific event. At the outset, describing the purpose of the event, constraints of the event, and the nature of the audience judging this event should be a priority. For example, such variables as the time limit for an event, a specific organizational pattern commonly used in this event, or even the suggested use of visual aids as part of the event description may have a bearing on the topic selected. In addition, the student should analyze the nature of the audience judging the performance. Although it may be difficult for the student to make generalizations concerning the audience, some general assumptions about the judge's value system, political predispositions, or general educational level may be appropriate when considering some topics.

While the purpose of "coach" is to guide and direct a student toward an appropriate topic--not dictate the topic--the coach should strongly encourage topic choice based on the nature of the event, competitor, situation, and audience. If a student can master the basic considerations necessary for topic selection in the forensic arena, she/he will leave the activity with the pragmatics of a framework from which topic selection choices beyond forensics can be made wisely.

Topic Development

Once the student selects a topic of interest to her/him and one appropriate for this speech setting, the task of developing the topic may seem overwhelming for the student. Students often demonstrate the propensity to broaden or narrow the topic inappropriately; in addition, the student may not have a sense of which areas (given constraints of the event) may be most appropriate to develop. If the student has little general knowledge about the topic, the student alone should be responsible for gathering general information on the topic; this preliminary research should indicate if there is sufficient information to develop a speech as well as the general areas/aspects of the topic which appear to cluster. The coach who has extensive expertise in the forensic setting may be particularly helpful in suggesting topic areas to explore or specific issues to address, and coaching assistance in this area should be a vital aspect of the educational process. Ideally, the student should leave forensics knowing which considerations are important in developing any speech topic for a given setting.

Research

Of all the developmental areas, I am probably the firmest believer of student effort in this area. While the coach may educate the student on types of evidence available and the appropriate use of each type, potential sources of evidence, and efficient research techniques, the student should conduct the vast majority of the research as an independent effort; again, the merit of such research experience should be viewed beyond

the forensic arena. The student who locates the library on campus for the first time, discovers how to utilize the card catalogue, or engages in a personal interview with an expert on the topic will gain invaluable knowledge for future research endeavors. I am firmly convinced that the legwork as well as the mindwork associated with the research process will assure the student a better understanding of the topic.

Perhaps ones of the greatest fears in the original speech events is that the student competitor will be "handed" an already-constructed speech. While I believe most coaches would not engage in such a practice, time constraints may make it tempting to suggest a topic, identify a single primary source of information for the topic, and encourage the student to begin writing. Encouraging the student to explore a variety of resource materials and allowing the student an opportunity to exert considerable effort in the development of this project will invariably lead to a better understanding of the topic and greater satisfaction with the end result.

Manuscript Development

It is in this area of speech development that I may encounter some strong opposition from my colleagues. While there are many coaches who encourage an extemporaneous style of delivery which does not include committing the speech to a manuscript, I do not support that approach for prepared original events in the forensic setting. Although most speeches a student delivers in life are not memorized, extemporaneous/impromptu skills can be developed through other events and there are valuable skills

taught by the specialized care required in a manuscript speech.

To develop a manuscript, the student should begin by developing a general outline for the speech and literally "talking through" topic development; from there, the original writing of the manuscript should be conducted solely by the student. After the student has generated a manuscript, the coach should serve in an "editorial" capacity. Perhaps because of my own writing interest, I am more intense than most coaches in this advisory role; nonetheless, I believe this editorial role can be beneficial to the student competitor for several reasons.

First, I believe we have the obligation as communication educators to illustrate a relationship between the spoken word and the written word; effective speaking skills have their foundation in effective writing skills. A student's conscious awareness of language choice, syntax, and appropriate grammar provides valuable training for both written and oral communication. Second, committing the speech to a manuscript helps the student become aware of the differences between the written word and the spoken word. For example, the use of vivid language choice and concise word choice are essential to the spoken word and the severe time constraints that often accompany it. The demands of this writing style may differ greatly from the demands of a creative writing project or technical report writing.

In addition, the "orality" of speech as well as the nature of the original speech event may dictate a student learn to forecast an organizational pattern or signpost verbal transitions throughout the speech. While these conventions are typically developed with greater subtlety

in the written term paper or the creative writing project, these conventions may be essential in a speech where the audience cannot ponder over the speaker's word or retrace ideational development. English professors often complain that my students begin to write term papers as "speeches," but they must also admit that these same students gain a greater appreciation for a clear statement of purpose and well-defined organization. Although many of my students become frustrated with my propensity for the "picky," most of them leave my tutelage knowing not to split an infinitive or how to use a thesaurus to elevate their language choice. By carefully selecting the written tools to convey a message, the student can gain a greater appreciation for the challenge of presenting an idea clearly, concisely, and eloquently. Hopefully, the value of these skills can transcend the prepared original speech events to extemporaneous/impromptu speaking situations as well as other communication settings.

A third reason for committing the speech to a manuscript is to provide a working document for revision. Since the forensic arena allows the student to compete with the same speech throughout the academic year, to me there is an implicit assumption that the student will continue to develop and perfect the speech. As a coach, I am best equipped to assist with this improvement process when I know the verbal content of that speech each time it is delivered. If the student's contest presentation is a "hit" or "miss" attempt each time it is delivered, the impact of my coaching assistance will be negligible.

Finally, there is one additional reason for committing the original speech to a working manuscript. From my perspective, the coach has a

degree of ethical responsibility for material presented by the student competitor. If there is a question concerning the accuracy of information presented or the context in which that information is presented, I am better equipped as a coach to explain my student's choices. While no coach can be absolutely sure that information has been reported accurately or that it has not been plagiarized, committing the speech to paper may encourage the student to become more accountable for the message she/he conveys in competition.

Delivery

The expectation to develop a manuscript is coupled with the expectation to memorize that manuscript. Once the student has memorized the original speech event manuscript, the coach should then begin training the student how to use her/his voice and body effectively. Since most students have little or no training in speech delivery, providing them with an understanding of how the voice and body communicate as well as an assessment of the student's strengths and weaknesses in these areas may be beneficial.

Again, the coach should provide the student with an understanding of conventions appropriate for delivery in this activity. For example, the student competitor's need to "create" an environment before performing in a biology laboratory, ability to adjust vocal volume to a janitor's closet, or ability to maintain composure when the next speaker rudely enters the room during performance are common challenges of the forensic setting. The student competitor who masters these delivery concerns will

find widespread application in other public speaking settings. In addition, the coach should train the student competitor the proper use of audio-visual aids which may be incorporated into the speech.

One of the most frequent concerns of judges is a speaker's tendency to sound "memorized" with a manuscript speech; unless great care is taken to overcome this style, the student competitor does sound as though she/he is reciting a message rather than communicating with an audience. While there is an awkward stage where the memorization of a speech is not complete and the speaker's delivery is strained, total familiarity with the text can "free" the student to concentrate on the delivery and work for a more conversational communication style. For some students effective voice and body training is painfully slow, but mastering these delivery skills will be useful in all forensic events as well as other communication settings. Perhaps one of the most helpful coaching tools for this phase is the use of videotape equipment; however painful, a picture is usually worth a thousand coaching comments when identifying physical and vocal problems of delivery.

Critical Evaluation

The final phase in which a coach's input can be invaluable is a phase which is often overlooked--critical evaluation. While the coach serves as both educator and evaluator at every stage of speech development, the competitive arena places the student in the position of being evaluated formally. Unfortunately, student competitors are often given ballots at the end of a tournament and are left to decipher and interpret

them individually. As a result, the student competitor may become defensive about the evaluation process--stereotyping judges as "incompetent" or "out to get me." If this phenomenon occurs, the value of the competitive setting is lost.

While I would be the first to admit I don't always agree with comments written on ballots, as a coach I feel obligated to encourage students to view such comments as a part of the learning process. If both the student competitor and coach analyze these evaluations and note trends, this valuable feedback should serve as the basis for strengthening the speech. These evaluations, when analyzed outside the "heat of competition" and from a supportive, educational vantage point, can enhance the value of the educational competitive setting. This final phase of the coaching process for original speech events should not be overlooked; it brings the student full circle in the learning process.

Conclusion

From my perspective, the role of forensic coaches in preparing students for original speech events is clearly an active and involved one at every stage of speech development. If the forensic coach is willing to commit to such educational detail at the outset of a student's forensic training, the the coach's educational/training involvement should diminish considerably as the student's competency and skill development emerge. After all, the forensic coach is not training the student for success in <u>one</u> forensic events; instead, the coach is training the student for success in a life-time of communication experiences.